

# Reducing officer stress and suicide rates for law enforcement



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Statistics show that in 1994, “ there were 300 reported police officers who committed suicide compared to 137 documented deaths while performing their duty for that same year and that the police suicide rate was found to be double that of the suicide rate of the general population pegged at 22 out of 100, 000 officers” (Turvey, 1995). Suicide or a suicide attempt is a grim manifestation of severe stress, incapability to handle problems or pain but hopelessness is considered the most motivating contributor to a mind contemplating suicide.

It arises from an apparent lack of control over a person’s behavior, emotions, or situations. It is a total surrender of a self to perceived environmental stressors. For a police officer, this feeling of hopelessness grows gradually, coming from different sources, until the problem would seem insurmountable (Loh, 1994). Chronic Stress The stress experienced by law enforcement officers is not unique to their kind of work since each kind of stressor in police practice can be present in other occupations but there is a high tendency of these problems to cluster in this type of job.

There are two kinds of stress inherent among members of the police force: these are chronic and obscure stress. Chronic or prolonged stress can cause people to regress such that their psychological development reverts towards being more immature. Childish and primitive behaviors may immediately set in. This is typical of sick or debilitated persons who tend to be self-centered and irritable because of chronic discomfort. Chronic stress also desensitizes a person towards human misery.

This type of reaction is induced as needed to survive in this occupation and considered as a defense mechanism for people to be able to keep working in abnormal situations. The result is the continued struggle for insensitivity to own suffering which consequently leads to insensitivity to other's suffering. This daily barrage of stress accumulates rendering the officers more vulnerable to traumatic events and ordinary pressures people experience. Effects of chronic stress may be too invisible to discern since this weakening of a person is gradual.

A traffic stop where a police officer needs to balance between friendly and defensive approaches creates an emotionally abnormal environment. Opposing professional and military procedures that an officer must follow often leaves him/her in a bind over everyday issues and regulations. Added to these is the sense of being isolated since officers must remain neutral and in control over their personal and social dispositions (Constant, 2007). Acute stress Acute stress is caused by traumatic events experienced by the sufferer.

Its causes are variable and unpreventable. Examples are family tragedies, loss of a colleague, major work changes, environmental catastrophes and others. Cops are not excused to this; they are pushed constantly into very tedious situations that often involve terror, danger, human denigrations and tragic death. Each of these kinds of situations can trigger severe stress that can be classified as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD (Dugdale, 1999). The National Center for PTSD considers law enforcement officers and firemen as rescue workers.

Thus, traumatic situations can cause a law enforcement officer to experience problems involving emotional, cognitive, physical and interpersonal reactions. Furthermore, the center includes the following in their list of possible traumatic events: life-threatening hazard or physical impairment, exposure to grisly death, bodily harm, catastrophic environmental or human brutality or annihilation, continued exposure to harm, loss or mental/bodily strain, excessive exhaustion, extreme weather, food and sleep deprivation (National Center for PTSD, 1999).

In a more specific scrutiny of traumatic events concerning law enforcement there are three categories identified; these are instances involving physical harm to the officer or others, incidents related to catastrophes resulting to mutilated bodies and deaths, and events managing public turmoil. Experts observed that the most traumatic incidents for police officers are intentional events such as rape, violence and abuse and not so much of natural disasters (Patterson, 2001). Sources of Stress Sources of stress of police officers fall under four categories.

First are the stressful events arising from outside of the bureaucratic police organization. Examples of which are relaxed treatment of criminals by the justice system and negative perception of law enforcement officers in the media. Second are internal bureaucratic policies and regulations within the police organization. These include lack of administrative support, insufficient training, equipment and management, insufficient salary, and tedious paperwork. Third are duty-related stressful incidents such as role disagreements, shift schedule, and overload.

Fourth are individual events or those that are unrelated to the type of work including marital conflict, alcohol dependency, and health concerns (Kroes, 1985). Effects of Stress A survey of law enforcement officers reveals the following as the effects of stress: reduced officer efficiency, low morale, public relations complications, labor-management problems, civil cases resulting from poor personnel performance, tardiness and absenteeism, high turnover and added expenses for re-hiring and overtime (Finn, 1997).

### Problems and Issues

Experts say that up to 30% of law enforcement officers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and there is too little psychological help for them. For example in the case of the New York Police District, which is one of the most numerous police force in the world composed of 40, 000 members, there are only nine psychological therapists attending to them (NBC News, 2007). Added to this problem is that police officers behave as an insular group who are often unwilling to talk to therapists or show “ weakness” to their peers.

Also, officers typically work unaccompanied or with one partner and are not trained to have a team mentality which presents challenges for therapists trying to reach those officers in distress (Miller 1999). Ironically, according to the “ Michigan State Police Behavioral Science Section, the importance placed by psychologists and police officials on individual-centered programs has eclipsed the importance of fixing organizational origins of stress” (Finn, 1997).

Moreover, stress program personnel and independent professionals often do not have the time to deal with the sources of organizational stress and few practitioners feel qualified to propose organizational modifications to law enforcement officials (Finn, 1997). Recommended Therapeutic Strategies and Techniques The need for regular psychological evaluation and help regarding post-traumatic stress disorder cannot be overly emphasized.

In working with law enforcement officers, it is recommended that the therapist and officer establish a safe and comfortable environment through an initial approval of the officer's choice to seek assistance, assurance of the confidentiality of the sessions and freedom for the officer to state his concerns. The intervention should be straightforward and output-oriented with clear benefits ahead. To be effective, the therapist must be attentive, must show concern and awareness, must be reassuring of the solutions and supportive through community referral and necessary additional networks.

The use of humor can also be employed as one of the forms of psychotherapy. This relaxes the patient and makes it easy to share personal information. In addition, it gives a sense of balance and perspective to a world that seemed full of violence and malice (Miller, 1999). Combating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder During the investigation of an officer involved in a shooting incident or any type of critical incident, he must be given consideration for a right to counsel which should be reiterated in the written guidelines. The officer should be provided with legal services from the union.

An officer should be regarded as an ordinary civilian. To ease the stress, the lawyer should explain thoroughly the legal technicalities of the ongoing

investigation. If an officer is involved in a shooting, the act of taking his firearm for further analysis should be thought of carefully. A service firearm is more than a tool for performing a cop's duty, it also represents the pride that comes with the occupation and the sense of security in relation to event that had just transpired. Taking it from the officer might give the impression that he is under suspicion even from his comrades or administrators.

It might also cause a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness which officers are not usually accustomed to. If possible, the officer should instead be given a replacement firearm if it can be determined that his actions and overall behavior have not radically changed after the incident. When an officer is to make an appointment with a mental health therapist for a debriefing, that therapist should be an expert in victimology. This appointment, different from any contact with peer counselors, should take place within three days of the incident and the expenses should be shouldered by the department.

The officer should also be given the option to contact another professional if he/she wishes for a second opinion and should also be paid for by the department. After the debriefing, there should be an evaluation of the officer's return to duty. This should include written guidelines to facilitate clear and smooth return of an officer to the line of duty. If the incident should involve critical events such as death or severe violence to another person(s), the officer should be exempt from patrols on a compulsory basis and be transferred to a less stressful line of work.

This action prevents the officer from enduring any stigmatization of misconduct or ineptitude as a law enforcement officer (Bettinger, 2001).

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Development of Team and Departmental Support In addition to the efforts suggested above, training and support interventions should be implemented to involve members of a law enforcement group to serve as therapeutic measures during or after stressful events such as a death of a member of the police. Mutual support among peers and supervisors should be encouraged.

Although the former is easy, the latter may require some added corroboration. Shared decision-making and mutual encouragement must be emphasized for effective job performance. Coping mechanisms such as humor and group bonding must be used to aid emotional insulation from stressful conditions. There should be meaningful traditions or rituals to dignify the work and downplay problematic aspects of the environment (Dowling et. al. , 2005).

Recommended Administrative Changes For supervisors, the following should be the priority: identification of sources of stress and suggested measures for reducing and eradicating them; promotion of effective communication and easing of strained relationship among officials, heads and individuals; and exploring the possibilities of hiring independent groups for facilitating training programs for the improvement of law enforcement officer welfare. Performance appraisal and behavior-based feedback should also be implemented in a constructive manner instead of making them an arduous task for every personnel that must be performed which may even cause conflicts and grudges.



Management decisions should be evaluated for their stress impact and look for ways that are more appealing and yet efficient to minimize their negative effects on the working environment. Members of the police force should also attend seminars to learn what to expect from a member who has experienced a critical incident. The warning signs must be explained to determine when to alert the appropriate officials. The managers can examine their style and improve to motivate their personnel to be more efficient. Higher officials must always attend to or visit police officers hospitalized or incapacitated.

This boosts the morale of the injured officer and also the whole department even in just a simple gesture (Miller, 1999). Shift Schedules Shift rotation has been reported to be causing considerable stress for police officers and their families which often lead to exhaustion, eating disorders, and sleep problems. There should be sufficient research to determine the least intrusive working schedule for law enforcement officers. Furthermore, there must be consultation with all officers to hear their sides on the proposed changes, if there are any, in their shift.

An agreement for shift schedule that fits all concerned should be reached if possible. The possibility of using a fixed-shift schedule is recommended due to fewer problems encountered in this practice. Special work schedules may also be reached for members facing unique difficulties in previous schedules (Dowling et. al. , 2005). Job Assignments Administrators have the power to match the capabilities of law enforcement officers to job assignments as needed by the agency or situation. Not only this reduces dissatisfaction in the ranks, it also increases the efficiency of all officers.

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This is in relation to studies connecting mismatch in assignments and officer capabilities. This can be prevented as early as the recruitment stage by performing a “ person-job fit analysis. ” This practice can reduce the need for future psychological treatment for officers incapable of handling the position for which they were hired. Furthermore, this preventive step would help potential officers avoid the deep feelings of guilt, disillusionment, and self-blame that happen when officers try to perform a job for which they are not trained or designed for.

If there are problems encountered in present officers already hired, a probable solution should be re-training for specific hard-to-perform positions to reduce the level of stress (Miller, 1999). The Need to Enhance the Department’s Image The law enforcement agency has its own share of criticism and negative exposure like other government agencies in the form of public opinion, media expose and legislative scrutiny which can be stressful for police administrators and line officers alike.

The key is a proactive approach of correcting or finding solutions for issues rendering negative image to the agency. This can be done by re-evaluation of policies and regulations causing inefficiency in a department and implementing agencies as soon as possible. Unpopular moves should be analyzed and new ways on introducing them to the concerned officers and the general public must be formulated. Hiring of an additional manager who can handle these types of problems regarding alleviating the image of the agency is also a good option (Finn, 1997).

Cater to Financial Needs of Police Officers With the risks and stress law enforcement officers face in performing their duties, additional problems involve insufficient salary and compensation. This adds up to the stressors and renders the officer more vulnerable to other external problems.

Addressing them is one sure way of steering them from related marital and personal problems such as divorce, custody cases and others which may have great impact on the performance and well-being of an officer. A way of working around this obstacle is saving in the department through organizational changes for more efficient and less expensive operations.

Rewards and incentives can also have the same beneficial effects since not only monetary assistance can increase the morale of officers but also the recognition and increased self-esteem. Saving can provide more freedom for acquiring better equipment for field operations needed to perform efficiently and safely (Milller, 1999). Improve Department Morale and Efficiency Efforts toward the reduction of organizational sources of stress can be an important step to increase law enforcement officer morale. Increased morale is synonymous to improved productivity, and, logically, efficiency of the department or whole agency.

Recognition of work-related stressors, concerted effort and sincere support toward alleviating the problems of policemen can be strong demonstrative signs of concern from management for the well-being of its members. These are helpful tools in delivering meaningful changes that can make big impacts on the lives of police officers (Finn, 1997). Suggestions to Manage Stress The government and private institutions can provide so much help to troubled police officers. Although colleagues can offer additional interpersonal <https://assignbuster.com/reducing-officer-stress-and-suicide-rates-for-law-enforcement/>

support, the officer can help himself by observing proven practices to promote a healthy well-being.

The officer can keep in mind the following suggestions: limiting on-duty hours to less than 12 hours per day, accepting rotations with alternating high and stress level functions to create a sense of balance, availing of counseling support programs offered through the organization, drinking plenty of water and eating healthy foods, taking several brief breaks at work, talking about emotions, staying in contact with family and friends, participating in memorials and rituals, using hobbies and exercise to combat stress, taking sufficient rest and care for the body and pairing up with a partner to monitor each other's stress (Trauma Center, 2007). Community and Public Interactions In return for the immediate and reliable service law enforcement officers provide citizens and the general public, the latter should understand the situation and the considerable amount of stress that the police ranks are experiencing in a day-to-day-basis.

There should be community activities that can open up these issues where solutions can be suggested by the public itself in an interactive and constructive manner. This endeavor will not only provide respite for the often-maligned police service personnel but also relieve the stress and provide positive outlook and appreciation for their service. The public can also learn in the point-of-view of the police officers the area where the officers often encounter problems in dealing with various sectors of the community. A harmonious environment can thus be achieved where both parties are satisfied and more comfortable (Finn, 1997).

Expected Effects of Recommendations All of these suggestions are intended to alleviate the stress level of law enforcement officers by improving duty conditions such as job assignments and shifts; implementing changes in the agency or department to unclog or revise stressful policies and regulations; improving the image of the service unit in the eyes of the media and the general public; providing the basic needs and security of law enforcement officers in terms of monetary or financial problems; and providing fundamental training and information regarding minimizing work-related stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. After all, they deserve all the help they can get both from the government, public and the media since they are also human like the rest of the population who dream of a better and peaceful place to live in.

## **References**

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